

Writing to Connect through Paired Courses

Daniel F. Collins, Manhattan College

Even as teachers must be willing to assume positions of change, they must also be willing to institute change, both in their students and in the institutions in which they work, through the ways in which they construct literacies with, and alongside, students. (Schroeder 180)

Introduction: Composition and Interdisciplinarity

As a composition teacher interested in the inherently interdisciplinary designs of our field, I seek out teaching experiences that tap into the ways in which various disciplines interact and conjoin. I don't want to see students condemned to a series of required courses that have no apparent connection to one another. Instead, I hope pedagogies cross disciplines to engage students and faculty in meaningful, exploratory ways. To highlight the potential of such a set up, I will focus on the recent pairing of two required freshmen courses at Manhattan College, College Writing and The Nature and Experience of Religion, undertaken with a colleague, Stephen, from the Department of Religious Studies. Our classrooms were thematically linked through a common set of texts and a series of writing assignments related to these texts. We chose texts for the ways in which they could illuminate methodological particularities of each discipline and for the interdisciplinary conversations we wanted to model. I hoped that this set-up would make frameworks of meaning more easily understood and available to students, helping them to express themselves more persuasively and self-critically.

Project Description: Making Interdisciplinary Connections

Prior to Fall Semester 2002, Stephen and I decided upon the readings we would share and the order in which they would be taught.¹ Shared texts were to provide a common backdrop for discussions and for subsequent writing assignments. They also contained the disciplinary “content” that students would work with in their Religious Studies course. Respective syllabi were drafted, although specific writing assignments, particularly for my writing course, were left intentionally vague, as we wanted some maneuverability as the semester progressed. Seventeen students enrolled; each course met two days a week, for one and one-half hours, back to back, in the same classroom.

Just as students do not necessarily make connections across their different courses of study (Pobywajlo 10), educators do not, often by design, illuminate such connections. Instead, educators generally follow the disciplinary designations under which they were trained. We wished to change such practice through an explicit pairing of our two courses. We hoped to engage connections across our courses and the disciplines that they represent. We knew that it would take time and attention to prod students to anticipate the goals and practices of each discipline (i.e., students in English work to anticipate the questions and practices of Religious Studies—and vice versa). Strategizing as the semester proceeded, we were aware of the risks involved. These risks may have included differences across disciplines that prove irreconcilable, power imbalances between teachers, unproductive interpersonal connections in and out of the classroom for students and teachers—in short, so much more is going on in collaborative classrooms that conflict is always a possibility (Speer and Ryan 44–46). Still, we wanted to provide students with a different kind of learning experience. Since students and teachers often labor under restrictive conditions, collaborative classrooms offer a “promise of change” to interested parties (Speer and Ryan 48). We hoped to combat student and teacher alienation in the classroom. By making disciplinary designs and interdisciplinary ties explicit components of our teaching, we

sought to minimize the potential for scholastic and pedagogical drudgery. Stated more optimistically, we hoped to offer a well-planned, highly choreographed semester balancing student work between two courses that at first glance have little to do with one another.

I am enumerating these goals in detail to highlight the process-oriented approach to our teaching, an element recognized as key to collaborative pedagogy: “Teaching collaboratively represents knowledge itself as less a set of material to be transmitted—facts and ideas handed over to the students—and much more as a social process involving critical thinking, persuasion, and negotiation” (Speer and Ryan 40). Collaboratively, we sought to provide students the processes of inquiry required to take up rhetorical and religious concepts and questions in the context of helpful peers. Through double exposure to the material, looking at the same texts through multiple perspectives, we hoped that students would learn the material in more comprehensive ways. Aligned with process, then, content was equally important. Pairing our courses, we offered students the opportunity to write to learn/learn to write in particularly active classrooms for freshmen students and their instructors.²

A Glimpse at One Assignment Block

What follows is a description of the ways in which I used one common text in my writing course (with passing references to what went on in the Religious Studies course). I will also extrapolate from this particular example various general principles and insights from the writing course as a whole. This overview should not be taken as prescriptive; rather, it represents one attempt at interdisciplinary practice in a specific setting.

I began the writing course with Harold Kushner’s book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner’s text, a bestseller since its publication in the early 1980s, documents his struggle as a young rabbi in the aftermath of his young son’s death from progeria, the disease that causes rapid aging. Devoted to God, torn in faith, Kushner cannot accept his lot in life; he believes neither he nor, more importantly,

his son warranted such a grim fate. Kushner's text documents his line of questioning after his son's death and the answers to these questions that enabled him to reconstruct and reinvigorate his faith.

I used Kushner's text as an introduction to the composition of an effective argument. Various rhetorical elements—including audience, purpose, thesis, evidence, counter-arguments, speculation—were introduced. Structure, organization, and tone were also discussed. Students wrote responses to each chapter; sometimes these responses were open-ended, and other times I asked specific questions on particular areas of the text. I wanted students to monitor and evaluate Kushner's argument: how does an author construct an argument on something as intangible as the workings of God? How, in other words, can a diverse body of readers understand and accept as legitimate an argument steeped in and nuanced by abstract reasoning?

During these first three weeks of the Religious Studies course, students were introduced to the disciplinary study of religion. Specifically, three themes were emphasized: first, all religions change over time; second, all religions derive from and support a worldview; and third, all religions address the problem of theodicy, or the exploration of the workings of God in the presence of evil. Different kinds of religious experience were introduced (e.g., sacramental, ecstatic, prophetic, and mystic), as were certain analytic frameworks (e.g., Marx, Freud, and phenomenology). Students were tested on this material in their Religious Studies course (through multiple choice questions and two short essay questions). They did not begin talking about Kushner's text until this material was completed—around the time that students began writing on Kushner for me.

For their first writing assignment, I asked students to choose one of Kushner's main ideas and use it as the impetus for exploring their own ideas. That is, they were to briefly explain Kushner's position and then elaborate on the ways in which it plays out according to their understanding.³ I asked students to consider the following questions: How has Kushner changed/reinforced your views on a particular element of religion? How have Kushner's ideas affected you as a reader

and a thinker? What productive questions and important insights have been prompted by reading Kushner's text? What changes have occurred based on your reading of the book? I encouraged students to consider the ways in which Kushner's ideas might be personally and collectively important, and I made it clear that they need not agree with Kushner in order to write a good essay. Nor did their beliefs necessarily have to change or change dramatically; they did not. Instead, the emphasis was on forwarding their own agenda, as prompted by their negotiation of Kushner's argument.⁴ I had hoped to use student writing as a way of moving further into their understanding of both their pre-existing ideas about religious matters and about Kushner's text. A balance, then, between existing and new knowledge was sought, along with an understanding of the wider spectrum of ideas in which Kushner's views play out. What did they find meaningful and why? What stood out for them and against what? Where were they, after reading and discussing the book?

Kushner's book is decidedly personal; he acknowledges writing more as a grieving parent than a rabbi. As such, he invites personal reactions from his readers. Advancing alternative images of God and religious belief is tricky work, brushing up against some of the most cherished and unexamined beliefs readers might hold. I was interested in my students' transactions with Kushner's text, and how such contact complicated their existing patterns of belief. These transactions are the pivot points of teaching writing. Through the processes of reading and writing—the materials of any standard college writing course—I wanted students to slow down and suspend such moments, to dissect, reconstruct, and learn from them. Student writing, then, became key points of intervention in their ongoing negotiation with the material. As Bruce McComiskey writes, "Assigned texts in social-process composition courses represent divergent ideological perspectives against which students construct their own perspectives on social institutions and cultural artifacts—these texts are not content to be learned but positions to be negotiated" (3). I was aware of and wished to respect the various beliefs that students brought with them to class,

however tentatively such views were held. Asking students to compose their own positions relative to Kushner's discussion helped me in this regard. Specifically, their negotiation of Kushner's ideas—difficult moments, key insights, lingering questions—became our focus as we wrote about the text.

I explained to students how so much of the work within the academy is textual, analyzing and interpreting texts according to specific frameworks that provide a certain “gaze” on the materials. One of their goals, then, in both courses was to monitor and become familiar with particular positions as readers, to look at a text from multiple perspectives and become aware of their perspectives as readers. I stressed that their work was much like Kushner's, i.e., sifting carefully through an array of challenging and competing ideas to satisfactorily answer pressing questions. No one writes in a void, I explained; rather, all writing is socially mediated by multiple and surrounding texts. “Writing,” McComiskey maintains,

does not occur in a social vacuum, nor is it confined to the universalizing geometry of the rhetorical triangle. Writers invent arguments out of the values and identities they have learned through their engagement with various institutions, and they adapt their prose to the perceived needs of an audience whom they invent and invoke in social and discursive relation to themselves. In these instances, writing is situated in *discourse* itself, in the constant flow of texts produced within the ideological confines of institutions which, according to the rules of their own discursive practices, either validate or reject the texts we write. (134)

McComiskey's post-process framework seems to me well suited for interdisciplinary work; that is, because interdisciplinarity is, by nature, discursive (i.e., of or relating to multiple and often competing discourses⁵), then any student writing conducted in its name must be hyper-sensitive to the ways in which context informs their text.⁶

Student writing, as seen in this context, derives from what Kurt Spellmeyer calls “a radical loss of certainty” (*Common Ground* 112).

For Spellmeyer, writing is the means by which to achieve understanding—students confront texts through their questions, and their writing documents this struggle. Texts such as Kushner’s become secondary, in a sense, as student writing commands more and more attention. Students pay attention to textual nuances; they honor the integrity of ideas. But they do not simply regurgitate this information in writing. They are not charged with “coverage.” Rather, required texts are springboards used by students to develop their ideas. Their writing—intertextual webs of meaning generated from the intersection of pre-existing beliefs and the texts read—reflects and documents their negotiation of the material.

Such work—an exploration of student immersion in their ongoing construction of knowledge—often falls outside the domain of academic work, and yet this exploration is vital to academic success. As Jonathan Mauk explains, “As students enter into academic space, they must, at the same time, enter into its making” (368). As students identified compelling or confounding ideas, their essays became direct responses to Kushner’s text, furthering in idiosyncratic ways the positions that he forwards. Given McComiskey’s social rhetoric, student writing taps into the generative power of their negotiation of the materials. I wanted my students to write about their experiences with Kushner’s text in the attempt to better understand his ideas and, more importantly, their ideas.⁷

Students chose compelling ideas to engage within their essays. Many students discussed Kushner’s belief that God is not omnipotent, that all occurrences are not God’s doing. Again, the overriding question Kushner asks in his book involves why tragedy happens. Very often, people believe that tragedy comes to pass at the hands of God, as recompense for gross negligence or as part of some larger, yet-unknown plan. Kushner cannot accept this logic, and he attempts to sort out its short-comings. In place of God’s omnipotence, Kushner argues that God is not the cause of all occurrences. Instead, some things simply happen for no reason (46). Kushner explains this premise by defining the universe as “random” and not solely a byproduct of

the actions of God. For Kushner, God is present, but his universe is unfinished, still unfolding. As such,

we will simply have to learn to live with it [tragedy], sustained and comforted by the knowledge that the earthquake and the accident, like the murder, and the robbery, are not the will of God, but represent that aspect of reality which stands independent of his will, and which angers and saddens God even as it angers and saddens us. (55)

Students, many of whom were raised Catholic and educated in Catholic schools, bristled at such notions. Question God's omnipotence? Never. Admit that some events, many of them dreadful and capable of sustained trauma, occur at random? Out of the question. And yet Kushner asks us to consider such answers, and as such, his text proves a fruitful ground for exploring current beliefs against other perspectives—in the hopes of solidifying what students know and value against the backdrop of why.

Students treated these ideas (and others) in interesting and challenging essays. One student, for example, recalling her grandfather's death, remembers the comfort that her mother provided her at this trying time. This student recalls how her grandfather often brought her and her family food to eat (she mentions cold cuts in particular). When he died, the student's mother told her that her grandfather was in heaven because God needed him more than they did, and that he would have a sandwich waiting for her when they saw each other again. This student notes that she is acutely aware that her mother offered her simple, consoling words because of her tender age (around eight) when her grandfather died. She also makes it clear that she has long since given up on the story, even as she reminisces about the solace it had brought. And yet she is begrudging of Kushner—she wants to hang onto these memories instead of acknowledging that Kushner may be right, that people die and that is the way it is, that how we cope and grow in strength in the face of tragedy and pain is the measure of our faith and commitment to God. Rationally, she knows this, and she expresses a kind of thanks to Kushner for laying it

out for her. But she will not let go of her previous beliefs, at least not yet, in part because to cede her beliefs to Kushner would be tantamount to acknowledging some kind of shortcomings in her mother's actions (i.e., her mother provided inadequate advice, at least according to Kushner). In short, she explains how Kushner implicitly accuses her mother of being a bad mother.

Whether or not this point is a logical extension of Kushner's text can be deliberated—and I tried with this student—her essay opens up fascinating epistemological questions regarding the construction of knowledge that may not get asked in singular, traditional classrooms. What happens when students are challenged by new ideas? In what pedagogical ways can teachers assist students in coming to terms with new knowledge? Even as students demonstrate a working understanding of knowledge different from their own beliefs, even as they espouse the efficacy of these new ideas, it can be difficult for them to accept them as their own. Her essay surely reflects the kinds of struggles students face when encountering new concepts.⁸ Writing such essays, inviting students to intellectualize their learning experiences, is one important way to help them construct useful knowledge (Harris 14). Writing provides a new lens of exploration into themselves as social beings and the discourses that make up their worlds, a kind of reflection that develops productive ways of knowing capable of helping them succeed in our classrooms.⁹

Pairing courses, I believe, can work such a rhetorical agenda into existing curricula outside of the discipline of English; pairing courses can be a way to utilize the social epistemic nature of composition beyond the writing course. Students explore knowledge as constructed, instead of simply accepting whatever they receive from their textbooks. They question what is in front of them; they can disagree with "authorities." In short, they begin to understand the construction of knowledge as a social process, and they involve themselves in its ongoing construction. Specific to our designs, the religious studies course demonstrated how disciplinary knowledge is presented and how that knowledge is used within the service of that discipline. Kushner's text

provided a look into the disciplinary practices of religious studies, its methodologies, its theories of epistemology and argumentation. It gave us a disciplinary base to work from and, when appropriate, against.

In this way, the writing course was not a prep course, servicing the curriculum. Rather, my agenda—informed by a constructivist epistemology—was to enable students to intervene in the disciplinary constructions of knowledge represented by and in the required texts in order to lay claim to specific positions of importance to them. Students were encouraged to make personal connections to the disciplinary materials—to engage them in the conversations of the discipline to monitor what counts as knowledge and to enter such conversations in order to add to the disciplinary body of knowledge.

In another essay, a student struggles to understand Kushner's designation of proper and improper prayer. For Kushner, improper prayer involves asking for things that should not be asked for, such as passing a test or landing a date, events or conditions over which God has no control. Proper prayer, on the other hand, creates and reinforces a community of believers working together to sustain one another in bad times and to celebrate the good. "Prayer," Kushner explains, "when offered in the right way, redeems people from isolation. It assures them that they need not feel alone and abandoned. It lets them know that they are part of a greater reality, with more depth, more hope, more courage, and more of a future than any individual could have by himself" (121). Proper prayer, in other words, allows believers to commune with one another and with God.

This particular student admits to how compelling Kushner's ideas are for him, saying that Kushner makes a great deal of sense, and that Kushner's conception of prayer jives with the larger framework of the book (i.e., espousing the need to explore how we respond to tragedy instead of worrying about its origins). What he finds problematic and fascinating is the widespread acceptance of improper prayer, and he includes himself as a former believer/participant. How will things ever change, he wonders in his paper, if people do not begin to accept their responsibility for their fate and the fate of larger systems, if they

continue to look to God as the source of all? Confronting this large, ever-looming question, he attempts to convey the changes in his worldview, given his newly adopted notions of prayer. Such changes include a greater sense of how religion seeks to create and uphold community, a point he finds compelling because he previously thought of religion only in personal terms (i.e., in terms of his own personal salvation).

His paper, as with the previous example, engages key epistemological negotiations with Kushner's text, in this case, illustrating the difficulty of changing deeply entrenched beliefs and patterns of living, even when new ideas seem more beneficial than existing ones.¹⁰ What is the value of new ideas, this student seems to ask, when the predominance of old ideas pervades the current designs of social institutions? Using Kushner's text in this way helps this student (and others) weigh Kushner's purposes against their designs. This approach is different from simply reading the book as a disciplinary text, gleaning from it a religious doctrine or idea. And one strong feature about pairing courses is that students are exposed to multiple agendas; two instructors address different kinds of questions and issues. In our case, rhetoric-based questions were balanced with disciplinary, content-based questions. This multiplicity and complexity should not be used to confuse students; rather, it should provide insight into how texts are used—i.e., what questions are important relative to the work disciplines sanction.

When students took up Kushner's text in their Religious Studies course, they were well versed with his ideas. Students knew the text so well that Stephen was able to initiate exercises and assignments that he never attempted before. For example, students read an article by Marcus Borg on images of God. Because Kushner is arguing for a "new" image of God in his text, Borg was helpful in tracking and exploring the implications of these changes. The framework of understanding Kushner's text was expanded then, complemented by further investigations into how to imagine God. Students also read the story of Job (Kushner bases part of his argument on Job). After reading Job, students re-examined Kushner's use of Job—what he used

and how he used it, and what he discarded or ignored and why. Through such practices of synthesis and analysis, students further contextualized Kushner's work within the discipline of Religious Studies.¹¹

Writing to Know

I was not expecting grand epiphanies in my students' essays, insights reflective of earth-shattering changes in their views, and there need not be any for the assignment to be an effective one. Instead, I hoped that students used their writing to come to terms with their acquisition of new ideas and concepts and articulate the ways in which such ideas and concepts intermeshed with their current understandings of themselves in a wider social world. This goal informed my work throughout the whole semester. That is, I wanted to make evident the rhetorical practices (in the form of reading and writing strategies available to them) that could assist them in working through difficult material and making it their own. Such strategies include isolating concepts, mapping key ideas, exploring nuance, articulating underlying assumptions, and speculating on prospective implications of specific lines of thought. This negotiation of knowledge becomes a chance for students to sort out divergent views in the hopes of engaging their own positions within a broader spectrum of ideas. As Kurt Spellmeyer pointedly explains, "To produce knowledge is to reshape knowledge by transposing it into the specific context of life or lives—transposing it from the past into an uncertain present" (*Common Ground* 196). Writing, used as points of intervention in this acquisition of knowledge, helps students sort out what they know and do not know and how to put what they know to productive use. A complex negotiation, a co-mingling of questions and insights, accepted beliefs and unexamined assumptions, lingering doubts and forward-looking visions, takes place every time students immerse themselves in their studies, for whatever courses they take. Writing helps students manage the process of understanding *and* articulate that understanding in language.

Collaboration and Learning

Anne DiPardo describes collaborative teaching as “a dance of points, counterpoints, and plans informed by the best each had to offer” and “a series of ecologically aware responses and adjustments” (116, 123). This metaphor articulates the possibilities of such practice: namely, instructors working together to choreograph teaching moments that introduce students to disciplinary practices and seek to move them beyond mere disciplinarity. As a writing teacher, attention to rhetorical practice remains central to collaboration, to examine how written texts fit and are fitted into the practices of students’ lives.

Another way of saying this is to state that collaborative teaching explicitly takes up questions of authority in ways that single-teacher classrooms cannot (Speer and Ryan 40). “One’s ‘canonical’ knowledge,” Tom Speer and Barrie Ryan explain, “becomes blurred when shared with a colleague . . .” (40). This sharing and blurring does not mean we extinguish ourselves—actually, when courses are paired, a teacher presence may seem that much more visible. Nor does it minimize the role and status of one course in relation to the other. Instead, we demonstrate to students the value of interchange and deliberation, across disciplines, while making room for divergent views. Toward such ends we create the conditions to help make students agents of their own learning.

The advantages of working together were borne out in our project. Specifically, I offer four benefits derivative of our collaboration. First, students in both courses were able to move beyond the traditional scope of each course. Reading texts for two classes, writing often on these texts, students were given ample room to thoroughly examine and learn difficult, often highly conceptual texts. Sharing texts across two courses challenged students in new ways, if only by working with two different agendas of two instructors. Greater facility with course materials led to deeper analysis. Students asked more penetrating questions as they began to understand the ways that different disciplines approach the same material.

Second, students wrote more often than in a singular course, and

they wrote for multiple audiences. Stephen and I were aware of each other's assignments, and, in turn, we offered a greater variety of nuanced writing assignments, helping students expand their rhetorical repertoire. Our students wrote with greater sophistication in their papers. For example, students exhibited a greater methodical awareness in their papers. There was a high level of attention to scholarly annotation, with students attributing ideas to specific authors and texts. Students wrote with more methodical awareness: students saw and understood the impact of individual disciplinary practice upon primary texts. They also wrote with a high degree of intertextuality; rarely have I been in a class wherein students were able to synthesize positions and make methodological or content-based distinctions so concretely.

Third, our courses began the building of community among freshmen students. In class together for three hours two days a week, student began to know each other early in the semester. They used each other's names when they spoke in class; they talked during the break between classes. Each course had better-than-normal attendance rates throughout the semester. Whatever the reasons, students came to class. At the end of the semester, almost all students said they would register for other paired offerings, and almost all said they would recommend such paired offerings to their friends and classmates. Retention rates may increase and attendance problems may decrease if paired courses were offered with greater frequency. Pairing required courses is not a panacea, to be sure. Pairing required courses, however, may be one way to address disciplinary disjunctions plaguing the undergraduate landscape.

Last, our courses furthered the building of community across faculty. They provided another forum through which faculty exchanged intellectual ideas and enhanced pedagogical skills. Stephen and I talked often about what to do in class and how to do it. These talks did not have the casual elegance of workshop talk either—we had to prepare for class. Such dialogue builds collegiality; it encourages the implementation of new pedagogical practice. Simply put, interdisciplinary

dialogue promotes *and* implements a wider sense of community across campuses. It offers a model for other interdisciplinary endeavors to be developed as well.

The Makings of a Conclusion: A Knowledge Project

The classroom is that space wherein students' understandings of a topic get muddled, complicated, complemented. From psychology to sociology, economics to ethics, educators immerse students in a series of concepts that help them name the world in new ways. These concepts may refer to elements that are wholly foreign to students, or they may be possible replacements for already familiar terms. In either case, students are asked to reorder their worlds, if only to see, for a time, the concept's efficacy. Students can shut down in the face of new knowledge. Or it can inspire them.

Writing can help make this process more explicit. Specifically, knowledge is constructed against existing social patterns on the basis of questions that do not always go away. This new knowledge cannot come from anywhere, however; instead, it must be composed from extant traditions, disciplinary and otherwise. To acknowledge this construction, to provide them the tools needed to compose their own designs, we offer a framework useful to writing students, namely, the belief that the making of knowledge (meaning) is an active social construction. As such, knowledge is not something empty or transparent, received and accepted without regard. Rather, knowledge is generated and generative, setting up students as agents composing meaning according to the designs of their experiences and in the service of whatever beliefs guide their conduct.

The pairing of courses dramatically changes the kind of education that students receive. Specifically, pairing courses articulates specific connections across academic disciplines. Furthermore, through a well-intentioned blend of assignments, pairing courses also connects academic work to everyday lives of students. Students are, in turn, provided the means to compose their lives according to their own designs. Kurt Spellmeyer writes, "The point of thinking is not just to

change ideas but to change actual lives” (*Arts* 15). And so our classrooms should help students see that ideas are lived; our time together should ask them to consider which ideas will help them to live their lives productively. This kind of work holds much promise for me—and for educators everywhere—in part, because it zeros in on that which we ignore most with our students: the unfinished nature of our knowledge and, by extension, our humanity.¹² I want students to see that the construction of knowledge is incomplete and ever ongoing, if only to invite them into the process. I want them to see the process as theirs to engage, to master. To help them define their niche, to add to ongoing conversations/construction. In this way, writing becomes as much about an unlearning of received knowledge deemed limited (by the student) as it is a forwarding of professed knowledge newly constructed (again, by the student). Ultimately and appropriately, academic and everyday lives—the lives of students and their teachers—are invigorated, both by the ideas students negotiate and by the writing that students compose.

Notes

1. The following texts were used in both courses: *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold Kushner; *The Upanishads: The Way of Chuang Tzu* edited by Thomas Merton; and the Gospel of Matthew 1–13. Certain other texts were not shared. Texts used for RELS110 included articles by Freud and Marx, among others. Texts used for ENGL110 included *The Craft of Revision* by Donald Murray and *The Writer’s FAQs* by Muriel Harris.
2. For an excellent overview on collaborative teaching, see Anne DiPardo’s essay “Seeking Alternatives: The Wisdom of Collaborative Teaching.”
3. See Judith A. Langer and Arthur N. Applebee for important conclusions reached regarding writing to learn. Specifically, Langer and Applebee report that writing in response to formal assignments assists students in the growing understanding and extension of complex material.

4. See Schroeder (27) on the distinction between received and constructed knowledge, as it impacts notions of literacy and the legitimacy of meaning-making methodologies across disciplines.
5. See James Paul Gee on discourses, particularly on institutional discourses as secondary discourses—the very discourses that comprise Gee’s understandings of literacy.
6. Johnathan Mauk argues the need to examine student writing in relation to “the material conditions that generate language and the social conditions that give it identity” (377).
7. William Perry’s hallmark study *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* seems helpful here. For Perry, the hardest teaching and learning involves exploring knowledge as relative and contextual. Perry believes that teachers should openly model their thought patterns, lay them out for students to see and, if necessary, critique. Teachers should also openly invite students into the meaning-making process and to apply this process to their lives (213–14). This assignment was a chance rather early on in the semester to do just that. In conversations with Stephen, he understood this purpose and valued the assignment, even as he noted that such work has little currency within Religious Studies (particularly because of time constraints if he was teaching the class alone). Personal response occludes the subject at hand, as students want to explore personal theologies.
8. Perry forwards nine “positions” that identify forms of intellectual and ethical development in college students. These positions outlined development from positions of strict binaries to the ways in which students would take up worldviews of their own and act accordingly. This student exhibits characteristics of positions seven to nine. In this range, students stake out a position or identity as their own. They are empowered by this choice and the meaning it can provide them. They are also aware of the limits of their position as well. Commitment, moving to some form of action, is not far off. Using the

taxonomy of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, this student exhibits signs of the stage of “constructed knowledge,”: a time where the student is self-reflective and passionately articulate about the ways in which knowledge is an ongoing social construction. Specific characteristics that relate to this student include the importance of understanding the ways in which ideas are engaged and employed for specific purposes (146) and the capacity to see beyond difference in epistemology (143).

9. McComiskey’s post-process methodology would serve WAC well if Mary Jo Reiff is correct (and I think that she is) in the need to move to post-process views on writing.
10. This student could also be placed in the same position as the previous student, exhibiting different characteristics of the position, however. He has committed to a new position, and he sees that a balance is needed between “contemplative awareness and action” (161). He also understands that “order and disorder may be seen as fluctuations in experience” (165). Last, he now sees that “[c]omplexity, especially the conflict between value systems, demands a capacity to tolerate paradox in the midst of responsible action” (166). As such, he is perched at the brink of commitment. What separates the two is a certain quality to this position, what Perry refers to as “temporizing.” Temporizing is when a person suspends the position he or she is in, as if to gather resources or strength to move forward (which is the best case scenario) or to retreat or simply detach (177). This student may simply need more time to adjust to the changes in his beliefs.
11. Students were ultimately tested on Kushner in much the same way as they were tested on the introductory materials.
12. As Maxine Green explains, “[N]o accounting, disciplinary or otherwise, can ever be finished or complete” (128). And as E. P. Thompson writes, “[W]e are not the end of social evolution ourselves” (13).

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